

News to Use

It's no surprise that women are becoming an increasingly important part of America's 21st century workforce. How important? Consider some of these numbers — and what they represent for today's employers:

- The proportion of women in the workforce nearly doubled between 1948 and 2000.
- In 1950, only 34% of women worked outside the home.
- Today, over 76% of working-age women are in the workforce.
- In 1965, only 44% of women worked while pregnant. By 1995, the number had jumped to nearly 67%.

Source: BLS, U.S. Census Bureau



"As you suggested, I made a list of my professional goals: 1) Make Ed stop blowing his nose when I'm on the phone; 2) Convince Cheryl and Sandra to wear less perfume; and 3) Get to the break room faster when I smell popcorn ..."

Making annual reviews matter

Stop wasting your breath . . . and start getting results

BY BARBARA METZGER
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It's a safe bet that there are few, if any, of us who actually look forward to annual performance reviews.

Most managers dislike the mind-numbing, time-wasting meetings and paperwork that too often accompany the review. And employees fear having their workplace behaviors placed under a microscope and nitpicked.

It's too bad, really. The annual review could — and should — be a valuable tool in evaluating real employee effectiveness, morale and growth opportunities. Instead of a torture session, it could be a terrific chance to help employees become more motivated and proficient. Instead

of dividing offices, departments and companies, it could help unite them.

So how can you get from what reviews too often *are* to what they *could* be? The secret lies in preparation and planning. Here are some tips:



1. If the job could talk, what would it ask for? Make a list of all the position's tasks, functions and responsibilities. Then select the most important elements, and rank how the employee is performing in those areas. You may even consider having the employee rank him or herself in those areas prior to the meeting. Comparing how they think

they're doing with how their supervisors think they're doing is a

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Create employee action plans for better results

Performance reviews are the first step in a much longer process of changing employee behaviors, improving skills and addressing opportunity areas. Real change takes only place because of a detailed, measurable and proactive action plan.

Unfortunately, the action plan is often neglected during the review process, which means that a year later many of the same issues remain uncorrected. Putting together an effective action plan doesn't have to be difficult, though — here are some tips to make yours as pain-free as possible, both for you and for your employees.

- **Focus on the issues most relevant**

to the position. Too many employers get caught up in assigning demerits for tardiness while ignoring the larger problem. Instead of lasering in on minor behaviors, look at the issues most likely to increase productivity, efficiency and morale.

- **Suggest some concrete ideas on how to correct the behavior.** If chronic tardiness is a real concern for a certain position (like a receptionist), don't just tell the person to "be on time." That's not an action plan, and it won't get results. Rather, stress how being late hurts the whole team, the customers and the public image. Discuss

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Action plan tips that really work

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why they've been late, and develop at least three specific steps they can take to change their behavior for the better.

• **Get employee buy-in.** Developing a good action plan isn't unilateral. Ask your employees to suggest ways they can change habits. Make sure they understand how their behaviors impact the whole company.

• **Write it down.** Something tangible increases accountability real change. Break the action plan into a series of specific, measurable steps.

Wrap up your meeting with a summary of the positive aspects of their performance and a review of an action plan you both can live with. Make sure you include a date for checking their progress on the action steps — and make sure that date is *before* next year's annual review. Depending on the seriousness of the behavior, anywhere from 30 to 90 days out is a good time to revisit the action plan and evaluate what's working and what isn't. Don't be afraid to make adjustments, dropping some steps and adding others if necessary.

Creating performance reviews that get results

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sor sees them may be a real eye-opener.

2. Identify the employee's strongest skills . . . and the areas in which they need to improve. This is important — too many reviews focus solely on the negative, which only diminishes (and sometimes demolishes) an employee's self-confidence. Remember to stay positive. Spend some time recognizing their accomplishments, successes and progress over the past year. Then discuss the areas that require growth.

3. Paint the big picture for the employee. So often, employees leave review meetings feeling singled out and picked on. That's a recipe for discontent. It's better to help them understand how some of their behaviors or shortcomings are affecting the department or company as a whole. Ask questions. Let them see the important role

they play — whatever role that may be.

4. Focus on solutions, not problems.

An area in which your employee needs to improve isn't their problem — it's a company-wide problem. It's also an opportunity, though, to empower and motivate employees. Don't just criticize them and turn them loose. Give them the tools and support they need to improve.

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Correctly handled, annual performance reviews don't

have to be a grueling, exercise in mutual frustration. They can be productive, informative and supportive. More importantly, they can actually fulfill the function for which they were created. Make some changes and see — I'm betting you'll be pleasantly surprised!

A certified behavioral analyst, Barbara Metzger helps companies hire, manage and motivate their employees. Contact her at 278-1200 or barbara@maxproductivity.com.